



Pick Your Path to Health

Responsible Sexual Behavior

There is one thing that affects all aspects of your life. But we're not supposed to talk about it, right? Perhaps while growing up you were taught not to even think about it.

Well, that one thing is your sexuality, and it has a special place in your life. You are, after all, a sexual being, and that comes with a price tag called "responsibility." Practicing responsible sexual behavior doesn't mean having or not having sex. It simply means taking thoughtful steps and making smart decisions to maintain your well-being and stay healthy. So, let's welcome the responsibility that comes with sexuality.

Here's why.

Five of the most commonly reported infectious diseases in the United States are sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). An estimated 15.3 million new cases of STDs occur each year, and you may be at risk. Women are physically more vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases than men. For example, in a single act of intercourse the chance of a woman contracting gonorrhea from a man may be as high as 60 to 90 percent. On the other hand, the likelihood of a man contracting gonorrhea from an infected partner in a single sexual act is about 20 to 30 percent.

Can You Trust Your Partner?

There is no easy answer to this question. Remember, just because you only have sex with someone you know doesn't make you safe. Talking about your sexual health history with your partner and establishing a level of trust before having sex makes you a responsible partner. It shows you care about your own health and the health of others. But it's not enough. You also have to find out about your partner's sexual health history. Be as creative as you want in your approach, but be sure to ask the right questions, such as:

- When did you begin having sex?
- Do you have sex with other men or women?
- How many partners have you had?
- Will you wear a condom?
- Have you ever been tested for STDs?
- If you use drugs, do you use a needle?

Remember, even if you ask these questions, you may not get truthful answers, so it's important to know your partner well. And talking about sexual health isn't only for new partners. It is an ongoing conversation that takes into account all aspects of your relationship as it develops and matures. If you grew up believing you should never talk about sex, consider that your partner's sexual history can affect you too. And know that talking about sex doesn't make you less of a person.

Getting Regular Check-ups

Whether you're sexually active or not, your health always needs care. Sexual health is linked to both physical and mental health and looking out for your health is important today and throughout your life, regardless of your age.

Dr. Janet Mitchell, Chief of Obstetrics at the Lincoln Medical and Mental Health Center in Brooklyn, New York, explains that whether Latinas talk to their doctors about sexual health depends on their age. "Adolescents of all ethnicities are somewhat reluctant and often come in because of their partner's suggestion." On the other hand, Dr. Mitchell says, "For older women, comfort with the provider is important. It's easier if they have an established relationship with the provider."

Some women are even embarrassed when making an appointment. "Women will often come in stating another reason for the visit before they admit the real reason," says Dr. Mitchell. But when making an appointment, expect that the nature of the visit may be asked and be prepared to say you need to see the doctor for your sexual health check-up. If the gender of the doctor is a concern to you, ask to see the doctor you're most comfortable with.

It's important to visit a doctor at least once a year for a check-up and talk openly about your sexual activity and your concerns. This may take some practice if you are not comfortable talking about sex. Make a list of what you want to ask and discuss and bring the list with you the day of your appointment. This way you will make sure not to forget anything important.

Getting regular check-ups is as important as talking about your sexual health. You'll be surprised to know that many women who have STDs don't have symptoms so they don't know they are infected. Women are also less likely to experience symptoms than men. But you don't have to necessarily have symptoms to seek routine check-ups.

Your doctor can also help you plan pregnancies. The Surgeon General reports that nearly one-half of all pregnancies in the United States are unintended. In addition, an estimated 1.3 million induced abortions occurred in the U.S. in 1996. Planning when to have children can help you improve your quality of life by allowing you to improve your educational attainment, employment opportunities, and ability to provide your children with good care.

A Word about Abstinence

Looking out for your sexual health includes abstaining from sex in cases where your physical or emotional health might be put at risk. It includes the ability to understand and weigh the risks, responsibilities, outcomes, and impacts of sexual actions and to practice abstinence when appropriate.

Get on a path to better health today by taking steps to attain sexual health.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."